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## FOLK-MEMORY IN FOLK-TALES

BY J. A. MACCULLOCH D.D.

*(A paper read before the British Association at Brighton, Sept., 1948)*

THOUGH folk-tales have an interest of their own as a kind of fiction, told for amusement in later times, yet it is certain that in their origin or in that of the story-germs, as one might call them, which lie behind them, they embodied traditions, beliefs, and customs of an early stage of civilization. Their material is so old as to be prehistoric, while yet they have often introduced matters of a much later age. They lead us into a world which is not that of those who tell such tales. Their groundwork is neither modern nor mediaeval, neither western nor eastern. In folk-tales kings and princesses have unroyal duties to perform. Their kingdoms are not so wide but that walking for a short period you find yourself in the territory of another monarch. A maiden's hand is won by the hero who performs some extra-ordinary tasks. Giants and monsters carry off girls, and marry them against their will. To women are ascribed such powers as they did not possess in historical times. Again they lead us into a world in which magic abounds. Wizards and witches are never far off. The possession of this or the other object gives its possessor the service of powerful spirits. Men and women practise shape-shifting, make themselves invisible, arm themselves with all sorts of magic powers or hide their souls in a distant place. Life in folk-tales is subject to strange customs; bride and bridegroom must not see each other's faces. It is dangerous to reveal your name. Unions with animals are not uncommon. There is a strange preference for the youngest son as his father's heir. These are incidents which certainly do not belong to the world of the European peasant.

Where and when are we to seek such a world in which such incidents and many others of the kind were credible? We must seek it in a remote past when the ancestors of European peoples were in a state of savagery, in which they did and thought such things as occur in folk-tales, unusual and irrational as they may be. All races, however civilized, have passed through a stage of savagery upon their upward march, a stage in which they believed that beasts and things could talk and act, in which the medicine-man was powerful and magic was common, in which society was organized on different lines from that of later ages, in which the youngest son did succeed his father, in which women had originated and

still practised the elements of civilization, in which the chief (the King of later story) worked with his own hands, in which all sorts of strange ideas were current—as that the soul might be hidden away for safety, or a man might mate with a beast who might or might not turn into a woman. The world as here conceived, the world of folk-tales, existed long ago. There are later strata in folk-tales, for they took on the likeness of later times also. But the primitive stratum, the prehistoric, corresponding to the present-day savage in a large measure, embodying irrational ideas and forgotten customs, is that in which we may see persistent folk-memory. Folk-tales, many of them, are hoary with age, transcripts of the ideas, beliefs, and customs of a forgotten time, but which tell their story as plainly as do the weapons of stone and bronze, the monumental remains, the rock-shelters, the hut-circles, the lake-dwellings, found everywhere. Folk-memory has preserved strange things, which the tellers of tales in later times could not have explained. Absurdities they are to us, e.g. the idea of talking animals, but let us remember that just such things are real and possible to the savage.

Look now at some such folk-memories. In folk-tales, while later conceptions of kingly state exist, there are curious incongruities. The king may have to work for his living ; he or his queen saddles his horse ; his daughters engage in menial tasks ; they marry suitors of low degree, who may have won them because they were successful in difficult tasks ; the Kingdom goes, not to the eldest son, but to the daughter and her menial husband ; kings are many in number, and amid the splendour of the palace traces of the hut or hovel are found. So in the *Odyssey* Nausicaa is discovered washing clothes ; and “ kings have neat-herds for friends and the pig-stye against their front-door ”. These are the memories of a simply organized social system : the stories had been told first, not of kings, but of the head-man of a village community and his family, of the petty chiefs of small groups, not far removed from their subjects. Note how this is suggested in Grimm’s story—“ Many years ago there lived up among the hills in our country *some petty kings* ”. The menial, again, marries the princess, because she has not been so very far removed from him in rank at one time.

In folk-tales the hero has often to recognize his bride disguised among several girls, dressed alike or alike in appearance. By some secret sign, arranged beforehand, by some slight peculiarity of dress, or by other means, he recognizes her. Here is the relic of a primitive marriage ceremony, traces of which have survived here and there in Europe, as well as among less civilized peoples. All this points back to some

ceremony, thus remembered, by which, to the primitive mind, dangers supposed to lurk in marriage were lessened or overcome.

The incident of beast-marriage, as in "Beauty and the Beast", has been frequently complicated by the idea that the animal is a human being enchanted to beast form. The idea of enchantment, itself primitive, has been made use of to give an earlier story more interest, especially at a time when beast-marriage pure and simple had become a revolting conception. But before that stage was reached many stories existed in which the hero could transform himself. He was one of a class of animals who are human in their native element. Or again, a divinity assumes animal form, as in savage tales and in classical myths. Or again, the animal is not said to be a divinity, but through union with a mortal he becomes ancestor of a tribe, as in a Dog-rib Indian tale.

Behind all such tales lies the memory of an animistic stage of thought, through which all races have passed, in which there is no real distinction between human and animal personality, in which animals are simply men in fur or feather. A Micmac tale begins—"In the beginning of things, men were as animals, and animals as men". But, further, they owe their origin to totemism, that primitive institution in which an animal (or plant) is believed to have been the common ancestor of the animals of that class, as well as of the members of a clan or sept, who call themselves by the name of the animal, and never kill or eat it. With the decline of totemism proper, the mythic animal ancestor often became a man who was only at times an animal. Beast-marriage tales are a folk-memory from a long distant past of a stage when animals were nearer to men than they were in later times.

Tabu, though the word and the thing are strictly Polynesian, is under one name or another a widespread savage institution and has a long history behind it. It appears in folk-tales and is hence a folk-memory. There are groups of tales in which a mysterious being makes a bargain with someone to do certain work, the condition being that if the person helped does not discover the helper's name, she or he will fall into his power. Such a story has many variants. Typical are the Tom-tit-tot. Rumpelstiltskin, and Whuppity-stoorie tales. The mysterious being bears these secret names: he is overheard rejoicing that the helped person will soon be in his power, and speaking his mysterious name. When he comes to claim his bargain, the person whom he has helped is able to say, "Your name is Whuppity-stoorie," or whatever it may be, and the discomfited helper rushes off in a furious rage. All such stories, and another group in which a wife must never ask her husband's name,

preserve a folk-memory of what was once of vital importance, viz., the Name tabu. It was of world-wide belief that one's name is part of one's personality, or in fact the soul itself—as is proved by the similarity of the words for "name" and "soul" in many languages, and that it was highly dangerous for any other person to know it. If he did, the owner of the secret name would be completely in his power. Hence savage people in all parts of the world show the utmost reluctance or even terror to disclose their names. These are kept secret, and a nickname or pseudo-name is taken and commonly used. In the same way the dead must not be named, lest they return and work mischief. And surviving into higher religions—Egyptian, Babylonian, Hindu, there is the belief that to know and use the secret names of deities is to force them to do the worshipper's bidding.

Another ancient tabu is preserved, in altered form, in the wide group of tales of which the "The Forbidden Chamber" is the type, most familiar to us in the story of "Bluebeard". Now while the obvious theme of "The Forbidden Chamber" is the moral one of the fatal result of curiosity, we may go further and seek the origin of such tales in actual tabus of a religious kind, to break which usually resulted in death. This was the inevitable punishment for encroaching on sacred things or places. The sacred grove, the medicine-man's fetish-hut, must not be entered unadvisedly. The men of Bethshemish died for looking into the sacred Ark, as Uzzah did for touching it. Pausanias speaks of the certain death meted out to unauthorized persons who entered the temple of Jupiter Lycaeos. In Egypt persons who entered certain sanctuaries saw such frightful phantasms that they died of fright. Similarly it was often tabu for men to see the rites practised by women, or for women to see those of men.

Everyone who reads folk-tales is aware of the large part which magic plays in them. This points back to an early age when the wise-woman or the medicine-man was a prominent figure in the social system. Mediaeval witchcraft used many magical practices, but it is not responsible for those which abound in folk-tales. Among the magical actions which we discover in the world of folk-tale are the production of anything at will, obtaining complete power over others by means of charms and spells, making inanimate objects speak and act and take any form, superlative strength, the possession of magical weapons, invulnerability to the most deadly arms, the power of shape-shifting as well as of transforming or petrifying others, giving drugs or articles which will promote fertility, raising the dead to life, magical and

instantaneous flight through the air, and so on. All these things occur, not as unexpected or unusual incidents, but as the affairs of ordinary and daily life. But this is a reflection of savage and primitive life. The medicine-man or wise-woman is all-powerful ; magic governs men's actions, unreal though it be ; and a magical theory of the universe lies behind their thoughts. There is in fact no magical occurrence in our folk-tales which could not be paralleled from savage sources, while savage folk-tales embody the magical beliefs of those who tell them. Once more this suggests that our tales are relics of a primitive society in which, as with savages, magic was an important factor, while the frequency with which magical arts are attributed to women, to the heroine or to a witch, should be noted. Among the more mysterious actions of folk-tales that of causing a magic sleep is frequent. Sometimes we are not told how it is done. All that is said is that someone casts others into a magic sleep. Sometimes it is caused by repeating a charm or by singing a magic song. Sometimes it is by mechanical means, e.g. by combing the hair, or by putting a ring on the victim's finger, or by a "sleep-thorn", or by means of "the hand of glory". Such incidents are based on a belief in their possibility, and suggest the hypnotic slumber. Is it possible that the use of hypnotism was known among the people with whom such stories originated and at an early age? An examination of the methods of the savage medicine-man, shaman, or sorcerer supplies evidence in favour of this view. Hypnotic methods were used in the "ghost dance" of the Sioux and other American Indians. Zulu sorcerers influence others at a distance, making them come when called, and this is a frequent incident in Icelandic tales—people going in spite of themselves when magically called by enemies. Annamese medicine-men hypnotize those who come to them by bidding them gaze steadily at burning rings of wood, while they talk to them and make weird gestures with head and hands. Much information will be found on this topic in the Smithsonian Institute's Report on Siouan hypnotic methods. If, then, savage medicine-men made use of what were deemed magical methods to induce sleep, there is every reason to believe that the magic sleep of our tales is a memory of those methods themselves.

In the folk-tale world animals talk and act precisely as men do, an excellent example being the "Puss in Boots" group. This is by no means a *façon de parler*. It is accepted as natural by children ; the peasantry think that it may once have happened ; savages believe thoroughly in it. We are therefore probably right in assuming that the

talking animals of all tales are a memory of an age when it was one of the commonplaces of thought and belief that animals did and could talk, and were, in effect, nothing but men and women in animal shapes. Modern savages still believe this. Sir Everard Im Thurn says, writing of the Indians of Guiana, "To the ear of the savage, animals certainly seem to talk. This fact is universally evident, and it ought to be fully recognized. It is not surprising that savages should think so, when we learn that Basque peasants often preface their tales with "This happened in the time when all animals and all things could speak". Savage stories of speaking animals are usually of the "Brer Rabbit" kind, telling how this or the other animal tricked the others. As a rule each people has its favourite rogue animal: Hottentots, Bushmen, and Berbers, the jackal; Bantus, Negroes, Mongols, and Koreans, the rabbit or hare; Malays and Dyaks the moose-deer or tortoise; American Indians turtle or coyote or raven. The humour of such tales is delightful, while the cunning of the animals, the vengeance which often follows on their actions, are a curious revelation of savage ethics.

There are innumerable stories in which someone's life, heart, or soul may be separated from him for purposes of safety. As long as it remains concealed, its owner is immortal. This is a reflection of a working belief of primitive man and of many present-day savages. It is closely connected with the belief in the Life-token, an object chosen by the hero, or born with him, or which has been in vital contact with him, and which shows in some unmistakable way—withering, falling, bleeding—that he is in danger. The connecting link between the Separable Soul and the Life-token is found in tales in which a person's life is wrapped up with the existence of some object—talisman, animal, lighted candle, etc. This idea and that of the Life-token are, in fact, extensions of the separable soul conception. It is impossible to follow the various aspects of these ideas in folk-tales, but we may cite the Egyptian story of "The Two Brothers", already existing in a papyrus of the fourteenth century B.C. Here one of the brothers hid his heart in the flower of an acacia-tree. The Separable Heart, as here, occurs in many later folk-tales. The idea of the Separable Soul is found in tales from every part of the world, among savages, in remote times. It is noticeable that in actual folk-custom the intimate connection of some separate object with a man's life is found, e.g. the common belief in Kashmir that "good and bad fortune, and life itself, can be made to depend on a talisman or necklace and on its being removed from the wearer's neck." Frequently, too, as in Africa, the Pacific Islands, the

Malay Archipelago, the life of a child is connected with that of a tree. This throws some light on the similar incident in many folk-tales. But further, as Mr. Clodd suggested, the Separable Soul incident is connected with the primitive idea that the soul can leave the body. If it can do this, it or its equivalent might readily be believed possible of being placed in a safe place. Sir James Frazer showed how some tribes actually believe that the life or strength is in the hair (hence one must be careful of one's hair-clippings); others choose a life-tree at the birth of a child. Several strands of belief point to one idea, that the life is separable from the man, and whatever is done to it is done to the man himself. The early story-teller saw the dramatic possibilities of such an idea, and to this we can trace the origin of such tales of the Separable Soul as exist in such numbers. It is noteworthy that the very people with whom such tales are popular after the actual belief itself had passed away, were themselves acting similarly with regard to the caul.

There are immense numbers of stories in which a youngest son, usually the youngest of three, or the youngest daughter, succeeds in tasks where the elders fail, or is ill-treated by them but overcomes, and eventually he gains fame and wealth. There are several groups of such tales, with different incidents, and each group has many variants. Obviously our sympathy for the youngest son is expected to be aroused, and this is a persistent purpose in all this mass of tales. This points to a time when the youngest was the most important member of the family. We are accustomed to the law of primogeniture, and find it difficult to imagine a time when the youngest son was the principal heir. Yet there are fossil survivals of this in countries where primogeniture is the rule. Again the actual custom still persists among certain peoples. The survivals in England are known as *Borough-English*, in France as *Maineté* and *Juveigneurie*, in Germany as *Jungstenrecht*. In other lands the practice of the youngest son succeeding occurred among the Scythians, as Herodotus shows; it exists among some Mongol tribes, and among some peoples in the Far East. The succession of the youngest son may be connected with the cult of the hearth and with the ritual of ancestor-worship revolving on the youngest. With the rise of the patriarchal system, primogeniture now gradually became usual: the youngest son was ousted, possibly despised. To such a period we may ascribe the origin of the early stories of the clever youngest son. There must have been felt much sympathy for him, and the stories give expression to that. They became popular, and long after the time of the conflicting heirships had passed, the theme of the despised but



clever youngest son remained popular, and from it arose innumerable new stories. All such stories, earlier or later, preserve a folk-memory of the time when the youngest son was the heir, of the time when he was being ousted from that position.

As a last example we show how a very popular story, that of "Jack and the Beanstalk" with its variants, is based on early theories or myths about the universe. Jack's coloured beans for which he had bartered his mother's cow, were kicked away by her in disgust. Next morning he found that they had taken root and formed by intertwining a sort of ladder, the top of which was lost in the clouds. Jack climbed up and reached a strange region where he, on successive visits, possessed himself of the wealth of a giant who lived there. Finally the giant pursued him, but Jack reached earth, hacked down the bean-ladder and the giant fell and was killed.

There are other European stories in which a man ascends to Heaven by means of a bean which he sows and which reaches to the sky. There he obtains gifts. Slavonic tales tell how a cabbage or a bean or a pea grows enormously, and by their means ascent is made to a wonderful region.

These folk-tales, and especially the Slavonic, point to a primitive tale or myth concerning the relation existing between the world above the sky and this earth, and between their respective inhabitants, and relating the possibility of reaching the upper region. What that primitive story may have been like is suggested by stories from the lower culture, Dyak, Fijian and Wyandot. In these a tree reaching to the sky is the means by which the ascent is made for one purpose or another. In another tale ascent is made by a mountain on which the sky rests.

Such stories suggest a time when man, seeing the sky above him and the earth beneath, concluded that these two must be husband and wife. Why were they apart? Because, as in a Polynesian myth, their children separated them, especially Tamemahuta, god of the forest who planted his head on mother earth and pressed with his feet against the sky. In other words, the lofty trees were believed to separate sky and earth. From this it was an easy step to assume that access could be had to the sky by climbing a lofty tree. Ancient Greeks, Hindus, Chinese and American Indians have similar ways of accounting for the separation. To early man, looking up to the heavens through the leafy forest, it must have seemed, as it did to the Polynesian myth-maker, that the sky rested on the tops of the trees. Then, as it seemed to recede into a

remoter distance, arose the fable of one particular lofty tree joining heaven and earth. Here is the source of the myth of a world-tree, as in Scandinavian, Teutonic, Finnish, Mexican and Guiana myths. To such myths we may trace the origin of tales in which a magical, quickly growing vegetable is the means of ascent to the sky, as in the " Jack and the Beanstalk " story.

There might be cited many other examples of folk-memory preserving in folk-tales matters which had ceased to exist in common life. These given here will suffice to show that a wide field for interesting investigation exists in this aspect of folk-tales, apart altogether from their many other aspects of interest